Rules of the Game
Monstrous Conundrums (Part One)
By Skip Williams

The current rules for the **D&D** game give players and DMs tremendous opportunities for creating unique characters and unexpected challenges. If you want to play a troll cleric/rogue, you can. If you want to bedevil your players with a rakshasa rogue, you can. Unfortunately, when you start mixing monsters with class levels you can find yourself descending into a maze of rules and numbers that could make a paladin curse.

This series delves into the fine art of creating monstrous player characters and creating monsters with class levels as foes for player characters. Much of the material presented here was drawn from the **D&D** 3.0 FAQ, and it still holds true in v.3.5.

Some Key Terms

One of the biggest hurdles players and DMs face when dealing with monsters is making sense of all the terms the game uses when dealing with the subject. All of these terms mean very different things (or there wouldn't be separate terms), but many of them look and sound the same. Here are several terms we'll examine in depth in this series:

Bonus Feat: An extra feat a creature gains outside of its normal allotment. A bonus feat might allow a creature to choose any feat (for example, the bonus feat a human gains at 1st level). A bonus feat also might be restricted to a short list or even be restricted to a single feat. (For example, a 1st-level monk can select either Improved Grapple or Stunning Fist as a bonus feat.)

Sometimes, a creature can have a bonus feat without meeting the feat's prerequisites. When this is the case, the bonus feat's source will say so. For example, a monk can select bonus feats from the list the class offers at 1st, 2nd, and 6th levels without meeting any prerequisites for those feats (see the monk class description).

Class Level: The total number of levels a creature has in a class. For example, a 5th-level fighter has 5 class levels in the fighter class. A 5th-level fighter/5th-level wizard has 5 class levels in fighter and 5 class levels in wizard.

Class level affects many things. See Part Two for a comprehensive look at class level.

The term "class level" and "Hit Dice" are often used interchangeably (especially when dealing with spells and other magical effects) because a class level provides a creature with a Hit Die. Class levels and Hit Dice, however, are not really the same thing. A Hit Die is something a creature can have by virtue of its race and size. A class level has to be earned through experience.

Character Level: The total number of class levels a creature has, plus any racial Hit Dice the creature has.

A human 5th-level fighter/5th-level wizard has 10 class levels. An ogre 5th-level fighter/5th-level wizard has 14 class levels (10 class levels plus 4 racial Hit Dice).

Character levels determine when a creature gains feats and ability score increases (see Table 3-2 in the *Player's Handbook*). Any feats a creature gets by virtue of its character levels are in addition to any bonus feats it has from its race or from its class levels.

In addition, character level determines how much experience a character earns when he defeats a foe and how many experience points he needs to gain his next class level.

> **From page 181 of the *Player's Handbook*:**
>
> **Hit Dice:** The term "Hit Dice" is used synonymously with "character levels" for effects that affect a number of Hit Dice of creatures. Creatures with Hit Dice only from their race, not from classes, have character levels equal to their Hit Dice.

Challenge Rating (CR): Challenge Rating reflects a game designer's best judgment about how tough a monster will prove in a fight. The CRs of all the creatures in an encounter help to determine the encounter's Encounter Level (see Chapter 3 in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*).

When characters defeat a creature, the creature's CR is a starting point for determining each character's experience award for the victory. You must compare the defeated monster's CR with each character's effective character level or ECL (see pages 36-37 in the *Dungeon Master's Guide).*

The experience award a character receives for a particular defeated monster is the same no matter what the encounter's EL was (but see Modifying XP Awards on page 39 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*).

Effective Character Level (ECL): Character level plus the level adjustment for the character's race. For example, a drow has a level adjustment of +2. Many people (and even one or two rulebooks) say ECL when they really mean level adjustment.

> **From page 172 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*:**
>
> Add a monster's level adjustment to its Hit Dice and class levels to get the creature's effective character level, or ECL. Effectively, monsters with a level adjustment become multiclass characters when they take class levels. Characters with more than 1 Hit Die because of their race do not get a feat for their first class level as members of the common races do, and they do not multiply the skill points for their first class level by four. Instead, they have already received a feat for their first Hit Die because of race, and they have already multiplied their racial skill points for their first Hit Die by four. Use ECL instead of character level when referring to Table 3-2: Experience and Level-Dependent Benefits in the *Player's Handbook* to determine how many experience points a monster character needs to reach its next level. Also use ECL with Table 5-1: Character Wealth by Level to determine starting wealth for a monster character.
>
> Monster characters treat skills mentioned in their *Monster Manual* entry as class skills.

> **From page 36 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*:**
>
> A Challenge Rating is a measure of how easy or difficult a monster or trap is to overcome. Challenge Ratings are used in Chapter 3: Adventures to determine Encounter Levels (EL), which in turn indicate how difficult an encounter (often involving multiple monsters) is to overcome. A monster is usually overcome by defeating it in battle, a trap by being disarmed, and so forth.

Encounter Level (EL): Encounter Level is strictly a tool for the DM to use when deciding if an encounter is too easy, about right, or too hard for a particular group of characters. It has no real effect on play. Some people think that Encounter Level determines how much experience character can gain from an encounter, but that's not so (see Challenge Rating).

Feat: A special trait or ability that either gives a creature a new capability or improves one the creature already has. A creature has one feat for its first class level or Hit Die, and gains one more feat at each level or Hit Dice that is evenly divisible by three. Table 3-2 in the *Player's Handbook* shows feats player characters get as they gain levels.

A creature can gain extra (bonus) feats from its race, class, or from some other source.

Hit Die or Hit Dice: The die (or collection of dice) rolled to determine a creature's hit points. A creature's Hit Dice can come from its race, from its class (or classes), or both.

A creature's total Hit Dice also serves as a measure of its overall power. Many spells can affect creatures with a certain number of Hit Dice (including dice from class levels) or lower. Other spells can affect creatures whose total Hit Dice (or levels plus Hit Dice) don't exceed a specified total.

Level Adjustment: A value assigned to a creature from a nonstandard race to help promote some equity among the player characters in a campaign.

When a character has a level adjustment, use the character's ECL (character level plus level adjustment) to determine the character's starting equipment and how the character earns and benefits from experience, as noted on page 172 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide.* Use the actual character level for just about everything else (see Part Two).

What's Next?

That's all the time we have this week. Next week, we'll consider the ins and outs of class levels, character levels, and the like.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon* *Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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